

# Calculated Indifference: The Soviet Union and Requests to Bomb Auschwitz

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**In the ongoing debate about whether the Allies should have bombed the Auschwitz extermination camp, the Soviet Union is rarely mentioned. Focusing on four operational challenges—accuracy, range, time, and intelligence—the authors compare British, American, and Soviet preparedness for such a mission. In addition, on the basis of little-used documentary evidence, they argue that Stalin’s refusal to bomb Auschwitz must be attributed not only to his antisemitism, but also to a complicated shift in the Soviet Union’s nationalities policy.**

Could the Allies have bombed the extermination camp of Auschwitz in the summer of 1944, thus saving tens of thousands of Jews from the Holocaust? To this day, this question elicits passionate debate among historians. During the summer of 1944, numerous Jewish leaders pressed the British and the American authorities to bomb the camp. The historical record shows that this idea was considered seriously, at least in Great Britain. Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden endorsed such a plan, but were effectively blocked by bureaucrats and military advisors subordinate to them. The Americans were quicker to reject the idea. The proposed bombing operation was set aside by British and American planners for several reasons: it was deemed a diversion from the main war effort, extremely risky for the pilots involved, costly in military resources needed elsewhere, and unlikely to be successful.<sup>1</sup>

Until the early 1990s, historians were almost unanimous in their criticism of British and American leaders for their “failure” to bomb Auschwitz. Holocaust scholars such as Yehuda Bauer and Martin Gilbert, experts on modern Jewish history such as Dina Porat, and observers of American and British foreign policy such as David S. Wyman and Bernard Wasserstein were (and with the exception of Bauer, still are) more or less convinced that the bombing operation was feasible (especially considering the ongoing bombing operations against the nearby I.G. Farben rubber and oil factories at Monowitz), and that it could have stopped or at least slowed the extermination process at the camp. These scholars offer various explanations for the British and American

planners' ultimate refusal. Some—Wyman among them—point to antisemitism; others, including Bauer and Wasserstein, attribute it to bureaucratic indifference, while Gilbert emphasizes the Allies' reluctance to accept the “unbelievable” rumors of genocide.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1990s, a small contrarian school emerged. Richard Foregger, a surgeon by profession and an enthusiastic amateur historian of air forces, was the first to challenge the accepted view. He researched the question not from the perspective of a Holocaust scholar or a diplomatic historian, but from the technical perspective of an air force planner. He meticulously reconstructed the technical details of the mission, calculating, for example, how many bombs would have been required to ensure a high probability of success in destroying the gas chambers, as well as the predicted losses of aircrew and planes, and the collateral damage to camp inmates. Based on his calculations, Foregger concluded that the mission was theoretically possible, but impractical due to the high predicted losses of planes and aircrew, the uncertainty of hitting the gas chambers, and the poor prospects for saving prisoners. Foregger's findings were corroborated by the technical studies of Richard H. Levy, nuclear engineer and amateur historian. James H. Kitchens, an expert on American and British air power during World War II, further substantiated Foregger's claims by carefully analyzing the details of the proposed mission in light of the results of previous operations. The bombing of Auschwitz, according to Kitchens, would have been virtually impossible to justify in light of the lack of intelligence, the uncertainty of success, and the extremely high probability of casualties among Jewish prisoners. Relying mainly on the findings of Kitchens and Levy, William Rubinstein ridiculed the “myth of bombing Auschwitz.”<sup>3</sup> Joseph R. White reached a similar conclusion, but from a different starting point. In his opinion, the Germans had the capability to continue the genocide at the same rate even after a successful bombing.<sup>4</sup> In response, Stuart G. Erdheim and Rondall R. Rice strongly criticized the studies of Foregger, Kitchens, and Levy, claiming that the mission was both militarily feasible and promising in its potential to stop or delay the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup>

In light of this lively debate, one can easily forget that the United States and Great Britain were not the only adversaries of Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union, as we can read in any standard history of the war, was a key player in the anti-Nazi coalition and bore the heaviest combat burden. Accounts of the Holocaust rarely fail to mention the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army. It is all the more astounding, then, that the USSR is fading away in the discussion of the bombing of the camp. Bauer, Martin, Porat, Wasserstein, Wyman, Kitchens, Foregger, Levy, and Erdheim barely touch on the topic of the Soviets' role. While we can find in their texts and footnotes numerous references not only to Churchill, Eden, Roosevelt, and Cordell Hull, but also to a myriad of middle- and low-ranking bureaucrats in the Western foreign, war, and air ministries, Soviet policymakers and military figures below Stalin and Molotov—for example, diplomat Andrei Vyshinskii and the military commander Ivan Konev—are hardly mentioned. The Soviets are usually denied agency, as if they were a force of nature, a wave of volcanic lava flowing westward in the direction of the death camps.

In the rare instances in which Soviet response to the Holocaust is mentioned, the question is typically brushed quickly aside. Yehuda Bauer, for example, writes that while the Western Allies fought on the basis of humanistic values, the Soviet Union did not care about the rescue of the Jews because “their [the Soviets’] ideological and political agendas were different.”<sup>6</sup> This view overlooks Soviet rhetoric, which emphasized internationalism, anti-fascism, and brotherhood among nations. Even Stalin’s well-known antisemitism, writes Harvey Asher, “was held in check by the Bolsheviks’ history of defining themselves as protectors of the weak and oppressed, and as fighters against the enemies of social justice and national equality.”<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Herf, one of the few scholars to engage directly the question of Auschwitz and the Red Army, has argued that the Soviet air forces (Voenno-Vozdushnie Sily, VVS) could have bombed Auschwitz. His efforts are certainly important and innovative, but as he did not have access to the primary sources and based his work mainly on postwar Soviet accounts, his findings have yet to be validated.<sup>8</sup> Robert H. Hodges had argued, in a short piece published in an American aviation journal, that “the record shows that the Soviet Air Force was much better positioned than the American and British forces to carry out that bombing and had the right equipment to do so.”<sup>9</sup> Joseph R. White, who studied German anti-aircraft defenses in Auschwitz and its surroundings, reached the opposite conclusion, noting that the results of previous Soviet attacks on the area “call into question whether the Soviet Air Force had the operational ability to conduct a surgical strike, such as a raid on the crematories would have entailed.”<sup>10</sup>

In this paper, our intention is to fill the gaps and recheck the arguments offered by Herf, Hodges, White, and others by discussing the question from two different perspectives. In the first part, we will explore four operational problems—accuracy, range, time, and intelligence—that made the bombing operation difficult from the British and American point of view, and then assess whether the VVS were in any sense better prepared. In addition, we briefly discuss the relative strength and military capabilities of the VVS. We will not dwell on the prospect of bombing the railways leading to the camp, because, as far as we were able to establish, no rescue organization ever raised this possibility with the Soviets.<sup>11</sup> In the second part, we will demonstrate that Stalin’s refusal to bomb Auschwitz can be attributed not only to his antisemitism, but also to a complicated shift in the Soviet Union’s nationalities policy.

## **Operational Difficulties in Bombing Auschwitz**

### *Accuracy*

On May 16, 1944, Rabbi Michael Dov Ber Weissmandel and Mrs. Gezi Fleishmann, two prominent Jewish leaders from Slovakia, sent a desperate letter to government leaders in the United States, imploring them to bomb the “death halls in Auschwitz” in order to stop, or at least delay, the mass gassing of Jews from Slovakia and Hungary. Weissmandel and Fleishmann specifically requested that the Allies bomb the gas

chambers and the railways leading to the death camp.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent petitions from Jewish leaders were similar in their appeal to stop the extermination while minimizing casualties among the Jewish prisoners. Some activists, such as War Refugee Board staffer Benjamin Akzin, implicitly requested an area bombing (as opposed to a surgical strike) of the camp, even at the price of countless Jewish casualties: “such Jews [were] doomed to death anyhow,” Akzin wrote. “The destruction of the camps would not change their fate, but it would serve as visible retribution on their murderers and it might save the lives of future victims.”<sup>13</sup>

However, his was a minority opinion. Most petitioners called for a precise bombing operation similar to the famed bombing of the Amiens prison on February 18, 1944 (Operation Jericho). They assumed that *some* prisoners would die as part of the collateral damage, but they also hoped that many others would be able to escape. The aim was, and remained, as defined by Weissmandel and Fleishmann: to destroy the gas chambers.

It is worth noting that an imprecise area bombing was never considered by the Allies.<sup>14</sup> Maj. Gen. J.E. Hull, Assistant Chief of Staff (Operations Division), wrote on November 14, 1944, to a U.S. Assistant Secretary of War that “positive destruction of these camps would necessitate precision bombing.”<sup>15</sup> This conclusion was in direct response to the possibility of the deaths of hundreds—even thousands—of prisoners in an imprecise bombing. This was an outcome that Allied policymakers wanted to avoid at all costs, not only for humanitarian reasons: an Army Air Forces staff officer summarized this view, writing in an internal memo that “there is also the possibility of some of the bombs landing on the prisoners as well and in that event the Germans would be provided with a fine alibi for any wholesale massacre that they might perpetrate.”<sup>16</sup>

The gas chambers constituted a difficult target, however. In the summer of 1944, there were only four active gas chambers in the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, all of them located in the western part of extermination camp of Birkenau (Auschwitz II). Two other gas chambers, completely unknown to the Allies, were hidden in the forest as standby facilities. The lone gas chamber at the original concentration camp (Auschwitz I) was no longer active.<sup>17</sup>

The four targets, gas chambers II, III, IV, and V, were relatively close to each other; the maximum distance between facilities II and V was 854 meters. Two of the facilities (II and III) were partly underground. The main challenge, as we can easily see in the reconnaissance photograph, was that the gas chamber facilities formed relatively small targets with narrow, bridge-like aerial profiles. Therefore, their destruction from the air would not have been easy.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, almost all analysts agree that any precision bombing would have to have been carried out in daylight. This in effect precluded participation by the Royal Air Force (RAF), which specialized in nighttime bombing.<sup>19</sup>

A 1947 U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) survey of bombing operations completed found that an “increase in altitude, increase in the size of the attacking force,



August 25, 1944 aerial reconnaissance photograph showing Auschwitz II (Birkenau). United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.

and increase in the size of the box [smaller units inside the formation] decreased bombing accuracy.” The fact that high-altitude bombing is less accurate, and also highly dependent on weather conditions, is self-evident. Increasing the size of the attacking force reduces accuracy, because the smoke caused by the bombing of the first wave of attackers obscures visibility for the rest of the force.<sup>20</sup>

Both problems could have impeded the mission in question. Auschwitz was located 997 km from the Allied airbase in Foggia, Italy, and though reasonably accessible for B-24 heavy bombers, it was on the extreme outer range of escort fighter planes. To use the Soviet airbase at Poltava for refueling would have been difficult, to say the least. After the Warsaw Uprising began in August 1944, Stalin was reluctant to allow the Western Allies access to it; his fear was that they could use the base to provide assistance to the Polish rebels in Warsaw.<sup>21</sup> According to the calculations of weapons analyst Pierre M. Sprey, 135 bombers, carrying 1,350 bombs of 500 pounds each could have destroyed half of each gas chamber with high probability. In any case, according to Sprey, Foregger, and Kitchens, a bombing from high altitude would necessarily have been imprecise and would have resulted in an intolerable amount of the collateral damage—meaning, numerous prisoner deaths. Indeed, Sprey estimated that many of the 1,350 bombs would have hit the prisoners’ barracks and also the rail

sidings, where, according to Foregger, “hundreds of freight cars packed with prisoners sometimes sat.”<sup>22</sup> According to their estimates, hundreds, if not thousands, would have perished.

Stuart Erdheim gives a more optimistic scenario: “Estimates by Kitchens and others can be reduced by 40–50% based on the approximate number of inmates living at Birkenau and used as slave labor outside the camp.” But even a bombing “advocate” such as Rondall R. Rice, who shares Erdheim’s optimism, admits that “only a minor error in deflection aiming (in this case, aiming bombs to the right of the intended target) could lay the pattern of bombs down the center of the camp. Even the tightest pattern would have had stray bombs that could have hit the camp.”<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, RAF and USAAF experience showed that to effectively destroy targets as small as gas chambers, numerous bombing sorties would have been required. On March 14, 1943, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Norman Bottomley wrote to Churchill concerning bombardment of the aqueducts in the Dortmund-Ems Canal: such small targets “must receive direct hits if they are to be put out of action. The accuracy of the American squadrons in high-level bombing is at present quite insufficient to ensure their obtaining direct hits on small targets without making an excessive number of sorties to do so.” It must be noted, again, that the Birkenau gas chambers had a narrow aerial profile, very much like the aqueducts to which Bottomley referred.<sup>24</sup> Needless to say, multiple sorties would have given the Germans time to bring air defenses to the camp, as well as to camouflage the extermination facilities through simple means such as decoy buildings and smoke pots, thus further diminishing the accuracy of future bombings.

Therefore, to achieve maximal results in a sortie against the gas chambers while ensuring minimal casualties among prisoners, a surgical attack from a low altitude would have been required. General Hull rightly observed that “positive destruction of these camps would necessitate precision bombing, employing heavy or medium bombardment, or attack by low-flying or dive-bombing aircraft, preferably the latter.”<sup>25</sup> The low-flying RAF Mosquito planes were indeed used for surgical, precise bombing operations, such as the bombing of Amiens prison and the attack against the Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen. However, Mosquitos were “almost solely used on low-level daylight operations over North West Europe” namely—close to England, as the factor of speed and surprise was crucial to their success.<sup>26</sup> Their use for a distant destination such as Auschwitz, even in a daylight operation, would have been extremely risky. Also, according to Richard G. Davis, Mosquitos were usually able to attack “only above-ground facilities . . . [Their] tactics, although highly accurate against walls and the sides of buildings, would have been less effective against the gas chambers at Auschwitz, which were below or only slightly above ground level.”<sup>27</sup>

Any real improvement in bombing accuracy would require dive bombers, and the Soviet Union had them: the Petliakov PE-2 versatile dive bombers boasted an



astounding record of accuracy in Eastern Front bombing operations. For example, “sniping attacks,” as these operations were called at the time, scored direct hits on bridges over the rivers Narva (winter 1942) and Dniester (March 1944), as well as the Dnieper and the Berezina (the Belorussian campaign of summer 1944). Considering the bridge-like reconnaissance profile of the four Birkenau gas chambers, we may conclude that PE-2 dive bombers had the capability to strike. According to VVS statistics on the training range, the PE-2 average accuracy in directly hitting a target of 200 x 200 meters was 98%. Difficult mission conditions have to be taken into account, as well as the fact that the gas chambers were smaller than the bridges hit. Even so, PE-2 dive bombers could have significantly minimized collateral damage to prisoners, as they had an average CEP (circular error probable) of 46 meters.<sup>28</sup> If one compares this to the 62.5 meters circular error of the USAAF P-38 Lightning, let alone to the 152.5 and 157 meters circular error of B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers, one must conclude that an attack by Soviet PE-2 dive bombers had the best chance to destroy the gas chambers while minimizing prisoner casualties.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the PE-2 carried a 2,204-lb. (1,000 kg) bomb load, the kind of heavy ordnance necessary for this type of mission. These numbers seem to challenge White’s argument that the Soviet Air Force did not have the technical capability for a surgical strike on the crematoria. In light of our consideration of the PE-2 dive bombers, it seems that in fact it probably did.

### *Range and Flying Route*

The VVS had other advantages with regard to a theoretical bombing of Auschwitz. The RAF and the USAAF would have had to fly from Foggia, Italy, a distance of about 997 km from Auschwitz. A mission employing precise bombers (e.g., the Mosquito) normally relied upon the element of surprise. If the target was in France or the Netherlands, this was relatively easy to achieve due to the proximity of the target to bases in England.

In this respect, it is not difficult to understand the VVS’ advantage over both the RAF and the USAAF. On July 24, 1944, when the discussions of the bombardment of Auschwitz were in full swing in both London and Washington, the Red Army advanced to the Lublin-Przemyśl frontline—only 160 km from Auschwitz. In August 1944 the camp was thus within the easy reach of *all* Soviet light bombers, including, of course, PE-2 dive bombers (with their range of 1,100–1,200 km). The PE-2 could easily take off from makeshift airstrips, and the Soviets had hundreds of these in the newly re-occupied territories.<sup>30</sup> The shorter range also could have solved a myriad of other problems: for example, there is more leeway (loitering time) when the target is closer to the home base, as the pilot does not need to hurry back home to refuel.<sup>31</sup> From this point of view as well, the VVS were better positioned to complete the task.

It is also important to note that Soviet air superiority was well-established, and the VVS outnumbered the Luftwaffe seven planes to one. According to Von D. Hardesty, the leading English-language historian of Soviet air power, between June 22 and July 4, 1944, the VVS had flown 55,011 sorties—an average of 4,500 per day. “Soviet air power, applied on the cutting edge of the offensive, had a powerful impact,” he writes. Never before had Soviet aircraft appeared in such numbers and force.<sup>32</sup> True, the Soviet Air Force was thinly stretched over an extended front, and just like the USAAF and the RAF, it probably had military priorities other than bombing gas chambers. However, considering its technical capabilities and vast numerical advantage over the Luftwaffe, it seems reasonable to assume that assigning bombers for an Auschwitz operation would not have been impossible.

### *Time*

Most historians who have studied the question of the bombing of Auschwitz agree that the available time window for the bombing was relatively short. Even if the Western Allies had been able to bomb the camps accurately and with minimal collateral damage, it is highly doubtful whether they could have done it in time to save many lives. The Vrba-Wetzler report—the main source of intelligence about Auschwitz—reached Britain only in mid-July, and its full version (including the imperfect but absolutely necessary maps) reached Washington only at the beginning of November. By then it was too late to save the Jews of Łódź and Hungary—the last of the large groups to be gassed at Auschwitz.<sup>33</sup> Even if these Jews had arrived later, the RAF and USAAF would have required additional time to obtain the reconnaissance photographs, analyze them, compare them against the escapees’ reports, and train the pilots. Furthermore, according to Davis, significant damage to the gas chambers probably would have required numerous sorties stretching over a period of “two to eight weeks from the beginning of the first strike.”<sup>34</sup>

The Soviet case is somewhat different. Information was flowing to the NKVD (the Soviet security apparatus) throughout 1944, and Moscow, as we shall see below, had obtained information on the camp as early as November 1943. While it could have been completed much earlier, the synthesis of all available sources came in the form of an August 31, 1944, report based on the testimony of two escaped prisoners. Considering the information available to them, the Soviets theoretically could have saved at least the prisoners from Łódź, and perhaps even some of the Hungarian Jews.

### *Intelligence*

It is well known in military science that accurate intelligence is often a necessary prerequisite to the success of any military operation. The role of intelligence in surgical bombardment operations, such as the proposed Auschwitz bombing, is particularly



crucial, especially if one wants to achieve surprise. In a similar case, before launching Operation Jericho, the RAF obtained precise intelligence on the Amiens prison including layouts, original architectural blueprints, and current information on the facility from French resistance fighters. The available information allowed the planners of the attack to build a model of the prison in order to train their crews. High-quality intelligence of a similar kind was required for other precise bombing operations as well.<sup>35</sup>

Even in heavy bombardment operations in which surgical precision could not be expected, accurate intelligence was indispensable. For example, the synthetic oil and rubber plants in Monowitz, located some nine kilometers from Birkenau, were repeatedly attacked by the USAAF in the summer of 1944, but only after first-class intelligence was obtained from several unrelated sources. The planners of the attack were not satisfied with a detailed intelligence report produced by a Belgian contract worker who returned home on leave and fled to London. Rather, they insisted that “the plant should not be attacked until [intelligence] cover has been received. The preparation of this provisional aiming point report does not eliminate the necessity for photographs. Upon receipt of photographs, ECU-CIU-MEW in either the Mediterranean or England will be in a position to judge whether the ground intelligence reporting of large scale production is valid.”<sup>36</sup> Although the Americans obtained the report in January 1944, they hesitated well into the spring. The Monowitz plants were attacked by USAAF heavy bombers only after reconnaissance photographs had been received and the destruction of such facilities had been declared a top priority by US military planners.<sup>37</sup>

Because of Monowitz’s proximity to Auschwitz II (Birkenau), its bombardment is usually put forward by scholars as proof of the feasibility of an Auschwitz bombing operation. Unfortunately, many scholars ignore the problem of intelligence. Compared to Amiens and Monowitz, the intelligence situation on the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex was inadequate. Yehuda Bauer correctly notes that the Allies “photographed all of these places [Auschwitz and its surroundings] from the air” while gathering intelligence for the Monowitz operation, but he does not discuss in depth the poor quality of this visual intelligence.<sup>38</sup> According to Kitchens, “the death camp appeared only accidentally and was wholly incidental to the interpreters’ work. None of them was tasked to look for concentration camps; their prints and viewing equipment were primitive; none of them had the experience or the interpretation guides to make the images speak intelligibly.”<sup>39</sup> Also, due to breakdowns in the flow of information between the various intelligence agencies, the photos were stored after the war in the Defense Intelligence Agency archives. CIA photo analysts Dino Brugioni and Robert Poirer brought them to light only in 1978.

Moreover, while in the case of Monowitz the Allies could cause substantial damage to production by destroying any of the numerous industrial facilities within the complex, in Auschwitz-Birkenau they would have had to target the four gas

chambers specifically. In that case, an insider's account, such as the one obtained by the Belgian escapee from Monowitz, would have been virtually indispensable. Unfortunately, the now famous Vrba-Wetzler report, composed by two Jewish escapees, could not have fulfilled that purpose. This report naturally focused on the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis at the camp and detailed the daily routine of hard work, murder, and mass extermination, but it lacked crucial information concerning the dimensions of the gas chambers, potential hazards for low-altitude planes (such as radio transmission towers), or anti-aircraft defense.<sup>40</sup> It might have been possible, as Kitchens rightly observes, to integrate the reconnaissance data with information from Vrba and Wetzler, but in order to do so it would have been necessary to interview the two former prisoners. However, unlike the Belgian escapee, Vrba and Wetzler were in Slovakia and were unavailable for debriefing.<sup>41</sup> The other intelligence report in the possession of the RAF, a report written by Jerzy Tabeau, a Polish (non-Jewish) major who managed to escape from Auschwitz, was even less helpful, and contained no worthy operational intelligence whatsoever. Tabeau, like Vrba and Wetzler, was not available to be interviewed as he was in hiding in occupied Poland.<sup>42</sup>

As with other factors determining the feasibility of bombing Auschwitz, the USSR had a substantial advantage over Britain and the United States when it came to intelligence. Jeffrey Herf rightly assumes that "due to geographic proximity and the extensive intelligence networks of the communist movement behind German lines, it seems reasonable to assume that the Soviet government was considerably better informed about the murder of the Jews than were its Western Allies."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, newly released documents suggest that Soviet authorities had detailed information about Auschwitz from a relatively early stage. It was much easier for escaped prisoners to reach Soviet rather than British or American lines; two Soviet prisoners, A.S. Piatko and V.J. Pugev, were able to cross the lines in November 1943. On August 31, 1944, the 4<sup>th</sup> Directorate of the NKVD of Ukraine issued a detailed internal account of the escapees' experience at the camp. In addition to a horrifying description of the gassing of Jews and other atrocities, they gave a fairly accurate account of the gas chambers, their location, their internal structure, and the height of the attached crematoriums' chimneys. Their report is more concise than the Vrba-Wetzler account, but just as accurate.<sup>44</sup>

The Soviet authorities had the opportunity to compare this account with the report of an SS deserter who had served three weeks in Auschwitz before being transferred to the front. The deserter, who was interrogated on March 16, 1944, did not add substantial information to the Piatko-Pugev report, but as he had been an SS guard, and presumably was able to move around the camp freely, he may have known much more than he indicated.<sup>45</sup> The key point is that all three witnesses were available to be interviewed by the NKVD, and therefore could have been further interrogated by intelligence analysts.

The Soviets did not have to rely on these three witnesses alone. On July 3, 1944, Soviet troops liberated the death camp of Majdanek. According to Gen. Vasili

Petrenko, the eventual liberator of Auschwitz, at Majdanek the Red Army obtained a treasure trove of information that was unavailable to the RAF and the USAAF: documents specifying every detail of Auschwitz and other death camps, “their essence, means, and modus operandi.” In addition, they were able to obtain information from captured camp administrators.

The NKVD displayed a keen interest in the camps: in August 1944 agents drafted a detailed report on Auschwitz based on a synthesis of all information obtained, including intelligence gathered by partisans. Moreover, the headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ukrainian Front painstakingly collected ample tactical intelligence, including reconnaissance photographs of all enemy concentrations in that area.<sup>46</sup> Sergei Kruglov, Deputy People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs, sent a detailed report to Andrei Vyshinskii, then Deputy People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, on the mass extermination of Jews at Auschwitz. After reading the account, which included numerous quotations from previous reports, Vyshinskii wrote in its margin: “Based on these materials, shouldn’t we write a report about this place Auschwitz?”<sup>47</sup> It strains credulity to believe that a politically sensitive report submitted to Vyshinskii would not have reached Stalin as well, and therefore it seems reasonable to assume that the Soviet leader was well informed about the mass murder of Jews in Auschwitz.

This high-quality intelligence about Auschwitz did not reach the Red Army units in the field, however. According to General Petrenko, the information never reached him, his superiors—Gen. Pavel A. Kurochkin and Marshal Ivan S. Konev—or any other field commander, let alone the junior officers, non-commissioned officers, or soldiers. Petrenko’s division liberated Auschwitz only because they were ordered by the headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ukrainian Front to “occupy the important enemy strongholds and rail junctions of Chrzanów, Neubrunn, and Oświęcim (Auschwitz) as soon as possible.”<sup>48</sup> According to the memoirs of Marshal Konev, commander-in-chief of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ukrainian Front, Stalin went over the plans carefully and ordered his generals to occupy the industrial facilities of Silesia intact (“This is gold!” he allegedly remarked). He never mentioned Auschwitz.<sup>49</sup> Pavel Polian assumes that this oversight is due to Stalin’s complete indifference to the fate of the Jews.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, the Red Army had the aircraft and intelligence necessary to bomb the gas chambers in Birkenau and were much better prepared to do so than either the RAF or the USAAF. Yet, the liberation of Auschwitz was not mentioned as a military task in the plans for the Vistula-Oder offensive. The 60<sup>th</sup> Army, according to Petrenko, “never received a special order to free prisoners.”<sup>51</sup> It is clear that Stalin alone could order his troops to bomb the death camp or to hasten its liberation. The question is not whether he could have done so, but why he did not.

### **“Politically Unacceptable”: Stalin’s Calculated Indifference**

Dr. Leon Kubowitzki of the World Jewish Congress appears to have been the first Jewish activist to mention the Soviet Union as a potential participant in the bombing

of Auschwitz. Kubowitzki did not support the bombardment of Auschwitz, as he was (justifiably) afraid that prisoners would be killed in such an attack. He wanted, at all costs, to deny the Nazis any opportunity to use the excuse that “the Jewish victims were not murdered by their killers but instead perished from Allied bombs.” As an alternative, Kubowitzki suggested on July 1, 1944, that the American administration approach the Soviet government with the request “that it should dispatch groups of paratroopers to seize the buildings, to annihilate the squads of murderers, and to free the unfortunate inmates.” To address this request to the Soviets was very logical, according to Kubowitzki, as Soviet prisoners of war, too, had been murdered in Auschwitz.<sup>52</sup> John Pehle, the head of the War Refugee Board, seems to have misunderstood Kubowitzki’s proposal when he refused to pass it on to the American authorities on the grounds that “it seemed inappropriate to endanger American soldiers at this stage of the war.” As we know, Kubowitzki proposed to send Soviet soldiers, not American ones. The idea of asking the Soviets to rescue Jews may have seemed so crazy to Pehle that he did not comprehend it.<sup>53</sup>

Rafael Medoff cites evidence that Yitzhak Gruenbaum, chairman of the Jewish Agency’s rescue committee, through his emissary in London lobbied Soviet diplomats for the bombing of Auschwitz as late as January 1945; in addition, Medoff has found a reference to a personal appeal from Anthony Eden (who, along with Churchill, advocated a bombing operation by the RAF) to Soviet Foreign Minister Viacheslav Molotov—an appeal that led nowhere.<sup>54</sup> As Harvey Asher writes, “there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that Moscow ever considered bombing Auschwitz.”<sup>55</sup>

Did the Soviets ever give an answer to these appeals? We know from a rarely mentioned document held in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem that they did so at least once. It seems that David Ben-Gurion, the head of the Jewish Agency and the future prime minister of Israel, dispatched a trusted emissary to the Soviet Embassy in Cairo. This Zionist diplomat, Eliyahu Epstein (Eilat), later to become the first Israeli ambassador to the United States, was instructed to establish preliminary diplomatic ties between the Zionist movement and the Soviet government; to promote the opening of a Soviet consulate in Palestine; and, above all, to arrange a meeting between Ben-Gurion and Nikolai Novikov, the Soviet ambassador to Egypt. Ben-Gurion also instructed Epstein to explore the possibility of a Soviet bombardment of the death camps in occupied Poland. Epstein met with the diplomat Daniil Solod around mid-July 1944, and reported accordingly:

Regarding Mr. [Yitzhak] Gruenbaum’s suggestion that I brought to him, namely, to bomb the extermination centers of the Jews in Poland, [Solod] told me that the embassy in Cairo is not allowed to give strategic advice to the military headquarters in Moscow. Moreover, this proposal is politically unacceptable [*ein makom mibhina medinit*], as the Russian government will not take any measures on national grounds. His government rejected, for the very same reason, several petitions that were presented on the basis of Slavic connections [*nimukim*].<sup>56</sup>

What can we learn from this short document on the Soviet refusal to bomb Auschwitz? Dina Porat, one of the only authors to mention the Epstein-Solod meeting, wrote: “It seems that the diplomat [Solod] referred to the shaky relationship between the Allies in the summer of 1944, as well the probable refusal of Moscow to carry out a plan already rejected by the West.”<sup>57</sup>

However, as the Israeli historian Misha Shauli has shown, Porat’s interpretation is based on a linguistic misunderstanding and on a partial quotation of Solod’s reply.<sup>58</sup> In his report to Ben-Gurion, Epstein used the Hebrew word *medini* as part of the phrase “politically unacceptable.” In contemporary Hebrew, the word *medini* means “related to foreign affairs,” and from that definition Porat seems to have understood Solod’s response as related to the “shaky relationship between the Allies” and Moscow’s reluctance to carry out a plan “already rejected by the West.” However, in 1940s Hebrew, the adjective *medini* referred mainly not to foreign, but to internal politics, as, for example, in another contemporary document, the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel: “[The state] will ensure complete equality of social and political (*medini*) rights [for all its citizens].” Moreover, the conversation between Epstein and Solod was probably held in Russian, the mother tongue of both men. In Russian, the word *politicheskii*, translated into Hebrew as *medini*, refers to internal politics, and the adjective *national* (*natsional’nyi* in Russian, *leumi* in Hebrew) referred not to a nation-state, but to ethnic identity inside the Soviet Union. In Soviet identity papers, individuals were required to declare their *natsional’nost’* (nationality or ethnicity), for example, Ukrainian, Georgian, Tatar, Russian, and so on (in this context, “Jewish” was also considered a nationality/ethnicity). When a Soviet citizen referred to his *nationality*, he had in mind this kind of identity.<sup>59</sup> Solod mentioned Moscow’s refusal to help others (perhaps the Poles as they planned the Warsaw Uprising) on either national grounds or on the basis of so-called fraternal Slavic ties. Therefore, when he rejected Epstein’s appeal because it was “politically unacceptable,” this had nothing to do with the Western Allies, but rather with the internal politics of the USSR.

Solod’s answer should not be understood as a private remark, meant only to brush off an unwelcome visitor. Rather, according to Epstein’s report, Solod and his superiors professed a profound interest in the exploits of the Zionist movement in Palestine. This was unsurprising, considering the strategic importance of the region. In two subsequent meetings, Solod explicitly expressed his wish to establish diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Zionist state-like entity in Palestine. Furthermore, when he was not sure about his government’s policy (for example, concerning the opening of a consulate in Palestine, or about the fate of Jewish refugees in the USSR), he did not hesitate, apparently, to speak frankly to his counterpart.<sup>60</sup> Concerning the bombing of Auschwitz, however, his reply was promptly and unequivocally negative.

Here it is important to note that we were unable to locate any definitive proof that Solod informed Stalin or his closest advisors about Epstein’s request. Considering

the difficulty of obtaining access to certain Russian archives, it is doubtful whether such evidence will be available in the foreseeable future. We do know, however, that detailed intelligence reports on the extermination activities in Auschwitz reached the highest ministerial levels in Moscow, as the report submitted to Vyshinskii attests. Indeed, considering Stalin's obsession with knowledge and control, it is highly unlikely that any information that reached the Deputy Commissar for Foreign Affairs would not have been passed up the line. It is also clear that Stalin did not take any action to help the victims. In this context, it seems reasonable to assume that Solod accurately expressed his superiors' position when he remarked that bombing Auschwitz would have been "politically unacceptable." The question remains, however, why this was so.

In his memoirs, Gen. Vasilii Petrenko attributes Stalin's refusal to hasten the liberation of Auschwitz not just to his "rabid antisemitism" (*zoologicheskii antisemitizm*), but also to his reluctance to free large numbers of Soviet POWs—who constituted a living reminder of his own strategic folly in June 1941 and earlier.<sup>61</sup> Petrenko did not, and could not, marshal any evidence to support his assumptions, but in this instance, we believe his intuition did not fail him. Contrary to the Western Allies, who made considerable efforts to free their POWs, Stalin and his inner circle clearly viewed Soviet POWs, in Auschwitz and elsewhere, as having *negative* value. This is highly ironic, as Leon Kubowitzky mentioned the "gassing of Soviet POWs" in Auschwitz as a presumed motive for the USSR to liberate the camp. Soviet soldiers who preferred surrender to death were perceived as possible traitors—"former servicemen," in the official language. Upon their repatriation, many were prosecuted on charges of treason and imprisoned within the Gulag system. Stalinist society was closed, built on an ideology of socialist purity. Repatriated prisoners of war, who had been exposed to the outside world, were perceived not only as potential fifth-columnists, but also as a likely source of bourgeois pollution.<sup>62</sup>

Let us now examine the second question raised by Petrenko, namely that of antisemitism. Stalin's well-known antisemitic tendencies have been described in numerous studies. One biographer, Edvard Radzinsky, wrote that the future Soviet dictator had been virulently antisemitic since his early days in Georgia.<sup>63</sup> If this was so, Stalin certainly hid it well, as he did not hesitate to cooperate with Jews throughout his career. Even during the 1940s, the darkest period for Jews in the USSR, one of Stalin's closest associates among the leadership was Lazar M. Kaganovich, a man of Jewish origin. As scholars such as Il'ya Altman, Claudio Ingerflom, and Harvey Asher have argued, the Soviet dictator's antisemitism was fluid, changing in content and form throughout the years, bound up in the intricacies of a larger political and ideological context.<sup>64</sup>

Stalin, unlike Hitler, could never explicitly declare his animosity toward Jews, as Marxist-Leninist ideology was inherently hostile to prejudices against racial or religious groups (all religions were seen as equally oppressive). Furthermore, antisemitism was repeatedly denounced by Soviet ideology as a cunning trick employed by the



ruling classes, used to divert the attention of the proletariat from its own exploitation. Writing to an American Jewish audience, Stalin himself expressed this view on January 12, 1931:

National and racial chauvinism is a vestige of the misanthropic customs characteristic of the period of cannibalism. Antisemitism, as an extreme form of racial chauvinism, is the most dangerous vestige of cannibalism. Antisemitism is of advantage to the exploiters as a lightning conductor that deflects the blows aimed by the working people at capitalism. Antisemitism is dangerous for the working people as being a false path that leads them off the right road and lands them in the jungle. Hence Communists, as consistent internationalists, cannot but be irreconcilable, sworn enemies of antisemitism.<sup>65</sup>

A number of studies, some based on newly released documents from Soviet archives, have documented that, from the latter half of the 1940s through the death of Stalin, Soviet state policy became increasingly antisemitic: prominent Jewish officials were expelled from the Party, state bureaucracy, army, and literary or arts organizations; many were arrested and executed. Jewish cultural establishments were dealt a death blow by the seemingly endless waves of government persecution. The infamous “campaign against rootless cosmopolitanism,” which targeted Jews, involved vicious attacks in the press in clearly antisemitic tones. A January 28, 1949, *Pravda* article directed almost exclusively against Jewish theater critics did not use the word Jew even once, but terms such as “parasites” and “rootless cosmopolitans,” as well as the surnames of the specific people attacked, removed all doubt as to the targets’ ethnic origins:

Shameless cosmopolitanism is not only antisocial but also sterile. It is as harmful as the parasites that gnaw at the roots of useful grains. It serves as a conductor of reactionary bourgeois influences hostile to us . . . [These theater critics] have lost their sense of responsibility to the people, and transmit rootless cosmopolitanism of the most disgusting kind, hostile to the Soviet citizen . . . The feeling of Soviet national pride is alien to them . . . But there are people contaminated with the remnants of bourgeois ideology who still try to poison the healthy, creative atmosphere of Soviet art with their noxious breath. Sometimes openly and sometimes furtively, they try to carry on their futile, doomed struggle.<sup>66</sup>

Is it possible that such virulent antisemitism, which became part of official policy from 1948 through the death of Stalin in March 1953 (undoubtedly colored by the clearly emerging Western orientation of the newly created state of Israel, that state’s apparent attraction for many Soviet Jews, and the deteriorating relations with the Western powers), was present also during the war and influenced Stalin’s choice not to bomb Auschwitz or to liberate it sooner? In fact, the first documented reference to the term “rootless cosmopolitanism,” clearly a synonym for Jews, was used a few weeks *before* the German invasion, in a conversation between Stalin and his right-hand man, Comintern head Georgi Dimitrov: “Comrade Stalin made it clear that between nationalism properly understood and proletarian internationalism there can be no contradictions. Rootless cosmopolitanism that denies national feelings and the notion

of a homeland has nothing in common with proletarian internationalism. Such cosmopolitanism paves the way for the recruitment of spies, enemy agents.”<sup>67</sup>

Stalin’s antisemitic views had not yet become a central element of Soviet ideology in 1944–45, but they were quickly adopted by an important faction in the Party headed by prominent ideologues such as M.I. Shcherbakov and G.F. Alexandrov. Stalin, as usual, spoke in a highly ambiguous language, and played one faction against the other, in order eventually to “remove those he thought were most eager to become his heirs.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, during the war, as Asher has observed, Soviet policy toward the Jews was mixed. On the one hand, Stalin established the “Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee” (JAC) and heaped unusual favors and privileges upon its members, mainly to elicit Western sympathy for and assistance to the USSR, as well as to denounce the Nazi crimes against the Jews. Some high Party officials, including Andrei Zhdanov, continued to denounce the antisemitism of their rivals Shcherbakov and Alexandrov, and even went so far as to punish activists who disseminated antisemitic propaganda. On the other hand, Stalin permitted Shcherbakov and Alexandrov to purge Jews from cultural life and the arts, and freely expressed antisemitic feelings during conversations with foreign leaders.<sup>69</sup>

This tense equilibrium tilted against Soviet Jews because of more general developments—most prominently the rise of Russian nationalism during World War II. “It is well known,” writes Gennady Kostyrchenko, “that in the mid-1930s Stalin promoted the ideology of Russian chauvinism in order to counteract aggressive German totalitarianism . . . . This ideology to a certain extent replaced the slogans ‘world revolution’ and ‘proletarian internationalism,’ which had become tarnished by intra-party conflicts with the followers of Bukharin, with the Trotskyites, and with other members of the opposition.”<sup>70</sup>

According to Terry Martin, this nationalist tendency was the outcome of a long process of transition in the Soviet Union’s nationalities policy. The 1920s Party line, which valued the indigenous cultures of the various nationalities over Russian cultural hegemony, was gradually replaced with an increasing emphasis on Russianness during the 1930s. “Soviet terror campaigns,” writes Martin, “were carried out in the idiom of Soviet xenophobia, the exaggerated fear of foreign capitalist influence and its potential supporters. Terror victims were invariably portrayed as spies linked to foreign anti-Soviet groups and their governmental patrons. As a result, Soviet terror campaigns tended to grow increasingly xenophobic as they proceeded. Given the ethnicization of Soviet xenophobia, this led to increasing suspicions of the non-Russian periphery and their cross-border ethnic ties.”<sup>71</sup>

Jews were far from the only victims of these developments. Nationalities that appeared in Stalin’s eyes to have cooperated with the German invaders, such as the Kalmyks, Chechens, and Crimean Tatars, were collectively punished and expelled from their homelands. However, in the new xenophobic reality, all national groups with “cross-border ethnic ties” were potential targets for persecution—even if they

happened to be the primary victims of Nazi Germany as well. Soviet Jews not only had ties to their fellow Jews all over the world, especially in the United States, but they had developed these ties with Stalin's blessing during the war in order to elicit American support. The irony was that although the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were carrying out Stalin's policy, their ties to the outside world at the same time made their position extremely precarious.

The JAC leaders made a fatal mistake in February 1944, when they appealed to Molotov and Stalin to establish a Jewish republic in Crimea—a clear attempt to take advantage of the ethnic cleansing of the Tatars. Tragically, both the internal logic and the rhetoric of their appeal relied on the old Soviet policy of supporting national cultures, which by 1944 was long defunct. For Stalin and his inner circle, this appeal was proof of a dangerous “Jewish nationalism” that had to be repressed. “The JAC had signed its own death warrant,” writes Kostyrchenko; “it was only a matter of time before the execution would be carried out.”<sup>72</sup>

The unfortunate JAC initiative was launched only five months before the Zionists requested that the Soviets bomb Auschwitz. Under these circumstances, it is perfectly clear why Solod (and probably his superiors) considered Epstein's request “politically unacceptable.” Solod said it explicitly when he mentioned the “national” issue as the immediate reason to turn down the request. Any special measure to liberate Auschwitz, whether through bombardment or a diversion of Red Army troops, could have highlighted the tragedy of the Jews, and thus drawn attention to their special status as targets of Nazism. After the JAC's foolhardy request to establish a national homeland for Jews in the Crimea, Stalin was unlikely to have responded favorably to a request to bomb Auschwitz.

The tendency to ignore the special plight of the Jews was also apparent in the stark contrast between internal and public Soviet statements following the liberation of the camp. Major General Ivan M. Grishaev, the head of the political department of the 60<sup>th</sup> Army, reported on February 1, just a few days after liberation, that “within the radius of 20–30 km in the territory of the Dombrov coal region, there are 18 branches of the concentration camp. . . . The main purpose of the camps is the mass shooting of people, first and foremost Jews, brought in from all over Europe. . . . The Jews were completely wiped out.”<sup>73</sup> However, the public report published on May 8, 1945 in *Krasnaia Zvezda*, the official gazette of the Red Army, did not mention the Jews at all, reporting only that “during the existence of the Osventsim [Auschwitz] camp, the German executioners exterminated there no fewer than 4 million citizens of the USSR, Poland, France, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Holland, Belgium, and other countries.”<sup>74</sup> Soviet observers on the ground, including General Grishaev, may have taken note of the special status of the Jewish victims, but their voices were muted by Moscow. Any official recognition of Jewish suffering was obviously politically unacceptable even after the liberation of Auschwitz.

Thus, it appears that Stalin was not only “indifferent” to the fate of the Jewish prisoners of Auschwitz, as Pavel Polian wrote in his excellent study; he was negatively disposed to them.<sup>75</sup> Britain and the United States have been repeatedly accused of “indifference” towards the Jews, though they did consider bombing Auschwitz and even applied pressure on Hungary to stop deporting Jews. Stalin, by contrast, refused to help the Jews in any meaningful way. He could have ordered his partisan units to help Jews or to hide them, but he did not. Worse still, he withheld detailed intelligence on Auschwitz from the commanders of the Red Army and the soldiers in the field. It is true that unlike Hitler, Stalin did not engage in genocide of the people he depicted as “rootless cosmopolitans,” and in the end, his army saved thousands of them. But it was not his intent to help them, either actively or passively. Was he indifferent to their fate? Perhaps, but this was an intentional neglect, a calculated indifference.

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## Notes

1. For an example, see David C. Wyman, ed., *America and the Holocaust: A Thirteen-Volume Set Documenting the Editor’s Book The Abandonment of the Jews*, vol. 12 (New York: Garland, 1989), documents no. 49, 54, 62, 67. For a recent analysis of the United States’ operational response to a request to bomb rail lines to Auschwitz, see Kevin A. Mahoney, “An American Operational Response to a Request to Bomb Rail Lines to Auschwitz,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25, no. 3 (2011): 438–46.

2. David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 288–307, 339–40; Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981), 267–312, 341; Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 307–20, 344–57; Yehuda Bauer, *Tguvot Be’et Ha’shoah: Nisyonot Amida, Hitnagdut, Hatshala* (Tel Aviv: Misrad ha-biṭaḥon, 1983), 141–42, 156–62; Dina Porat, *Hanhaga Be’Milkud: Ha-Yishuv Nohah Ha-Shoah 1942–1945* (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘oved, 1986), 392–403. In a recent interview, Bauer changed his views in the Auschwitz bombing question, arguing that “there was no real opportunity to destroy Nazi

annihilation mechanisms by aerial bombings, except at the cost of the lives of many Jews.” See Tom Segev, “Maybe Roosevelt couldn’t have saved the Jews from the Nazis after all: Leading Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer finds himself at odds with the historiographic establishment,” *Haaretz*, November 2, 2012.

3. Richard Foregger, “Technical Analysis of Methods to Bomb the Gas Chambers at Auschwitz,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 5, no. 4 (1990): 403–23; James H. Kitchens, “The Bombing of Auschwitz Re-Examined,” *The Journal of Military History* 58, no. 2 (1994): 233–66; Richard H. Levy, “The Bombing of Auschwitz Revisited: A Critical Analysis,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 10, no. 3 (1996): 267–98; Michael Berenbaum and Michael J. Neufeld, eds., *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2000), 101–27; William D. Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis* (London: Routledge, 1997), 180–81.

4. Joseph R. White, “Target Auschwitz: Historical and Hypothetical German Responses to Allied Attack,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 16, no. 1 (2002): 54–76.

5. Stuart G. Erdheim, “Could the Allies Have Bombed Auschwitz-Birkenau?” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997): 129–70; Rondall R. Rice, “Bombing Auschwitz: U.S. Fifteenth Air Force and the Military Aspects of a Possible Attack,” in Berenbaum and Neufeld, *Bombing of Auschwitz*, 127–86.

6. Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations: 1933–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 255.

7. Harvey Asher, “The Soviet Union, the Holocaust, and Auschwitz,” *Kritika: Exploration in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 4 (2003): 889.

8. Jeffrey Herf, “The Nazi Extermination Camps and the Ally to the East: Could the Red Army and Air Force Have Stopped or Slowed the Final Solution?” *Kritika* 4, no. 4 (2003): 913–30; For example, see Herf’s reliance on the on war stories of Vasilii Grossman.

9. Robert H. Hodges, “Auschwitz Revisited: Could the Soviets Have Bombed the Camp?” *Air Power History* 44 (Winter 1997): 75.

10. White, “Target Auschwitz,” 72.

11. This idea was raised before the Western Allies but rejected almost immediately. In fact, Soviet partisans were engaged in wide-ranging operations of railway sabotage throughout the Eastern Front, but the Germans showed an astounding ability to quickly reconstruct damaged railways. This sheds some doubt on the potential ability of railway bombing to considerably delay the transport of Jews to death camps. See Aleksandr Gogun, *Stalinskie Kommandos: Ukrainskie partizanskie formirovaniia. Maloizuchennie stranitsi istorii* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2008), 128–30.

12. Document no. 14, M.B and G.Fl, May 12, 1944, in Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, 12: 96.

13. Document no. 47, War Refugee Board, interoffice communication, B. Akzin to L.S. Lesser, June 29, 1944, in *ibid.*, 153–54.

14. For an analysis of the term “precision bombing” in World War II standards, see Rice, “Bombing Auschwitz,” 172.
15. Document no. 67, Hull to the Assistant Secretary of War, November 14, 1944, in Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, 12:182.
16. Document no. 62, Anderson to Spaatz, October 5, 1944, in *ibid.*, 174.
17. This fact is overlooked by Kitchens in his study, “Bombing of Auschwitz,” 252. He assumes that the bombers had to attack “five widely spaced buildings,” when in fact they had only to bomb four targets that were relatively close to each other.
18. Facilities II and III (gas chamber area): 30 × 9 meters; facilities IV and V (overall area): 67 × 13 meters. Foregger, “Technical Analysis,” 407–408.
19. These were exactly the arguments of Sir Archibald Sinclair. See Sinclair to Eden, July 15, 1944, in Berenbaum and Neufeld, *Bombing of Auschwitz*, 267–68; Rice, “Bombing Auschwitz,” 172–76; Richard G. Davis, “The Bombing of Auschwitz: Comments on a Historical Speculation,” in Berenbaum and Neufeld, *Bombing of Auschwitz*, 218.
20. Military Analysis Division, “Report No. 3, Bombing Accuracy of the USAAF Heavy & Medium Bombers,” in *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey* (USSBS), vol. 3 (New York: Garland, 1976), 1–2, 6–7. The 1947 report was based on a survey conducted in 1944–1947.
21. Though they did use the base for a small number of missions as late as August and September 1944. Document no. 73, Spaatz to Eaker, HQ, MAAF, APO 520, April 27, 1944, in Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, 12:199. Spaatz uses the term “extreme range” referring to the Blechhammer plants, which were located forty-seven miles from Auschwitz. However, his reference to B-24 planes is obviously a mistake. Blechhammer (and Auschwitz) were on the “extreme range” of escort fighter planes. Regarding the Poltava airbase, see “Foreign Office to Prime Minister,” August 23, 1944, quoting telegram no. 2216 from Moscow, dated August 22, as well as Prime Minister to President Roosevelt, no. 769, August 25, 1944, in Cabinet Papers 1940–1945, reel 4, series 1, 3/11/12, Harvard University Lamont Library (HULL).
22. Sprey is quoted in an April 17, 1983, *Washington Post* article by Morton Minz. See also Foregger, “Technical Analysis,” 408.
23. Rice, “Bombing Auschwitz,” in Berenbaum and Neufeld, *Bombing of Auschwitz*, 178.
24. N.H. Bottomley to Prime Minister, March 14, 1943, in Cabinet Papers, 1940–1945, reel 4, series 1, 3/11/10, HULL.
25. Document no. 67, J.H. Hull to Assistant Secretary of War, November 8, 1944, in Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, 12:182.
26. Jack Fishman, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down* (London: Souvenir, 1982), 42; and Davis, “The Bombing of Auschwitz: Comments,” 218–19.
27. Davis, “The Bombing of Auschwitz: Comments,” 218–19; Kitchens, “The Bombing of Auschwitz,” 258–59; Foregger, “Technical Analysis,” 409.
28. The term “circular error probable” (CEP) describes the probability of one-half of the bombs falling within a circle of a designated radius. Thus, it is important to understand that a CEP smaller than the distance between the gas chambers and the inmates’ barracks does not at



all preclude serious collateral damage, as the other 50% percent of the bombs could land outside this designated radius.

29. Foregger, "Technical Analysis," 409; Peter S. Smith, *Dive Bomber! Aircraft, Technology and Tactics in World War II* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 347; The source for the technical data on the PE-2 planes is V.G. Nikiforov et al., eds., *Sovetskaia aviatsiia v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine* (Moscow: Glavnyi Stab VVS SSSR, 1962), chapter 7, table 290, available online at <http://militera.lib.ru/h/sovaviation/index.html> (accessed on January 6, 2013); David Glantz, *Companion to Colossus Reborn: Key Documents and Statistics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 147. Compare to the exhibits in USSBS, vol. 3, "Bombing Accuracy," especially exhibit no. 3, "Comparison of Actual Circular Error to Expected Circular Error on Ten Target Complexes."

30. Arkhiv Ministerstvo Oborony (Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, AMO), fond 35, opis 28737, dela 7, 33, 116, 292, 294; Hodges, "Auschwitz Revisited," 74–75; Von Hardesty, *Red Phoenix: The Rise of Soviet Air Power, 1941–1945* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), Appendix 8, p. 250. For information about the take-off run of PE-2 dive bombers, see Yefim Gordon, *Soviet Air Power in World War 2* (Hinckley, UK: Midland, 2008), 388–89.

31. "Loitering" refers to cruise time above the target. It is limited, among other things, by the amount of fuel available for the return journey.

32. Hardesty, *Phoenix*, 191–93.

33. Rice, "Bombing of Auschwitz," in Berenbaum and Neufeld, *Bombing of Auschwitz*, 160–61.

34. Davis, "Bombing of Auschwitz: Comments," in *ibid.*, 221–22.

35. Surprise is especially crucial for dive bombing operations: without it, the result can be disastrous, as the RAF learned after the unsuccessful dive bombing attack on the German battle cruiser *Scharnhorst* (June 12, 1940). See Smith, *Dive Bomber*, 205.

36. Document no.72, in Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, 12:194–95.

37. Military Analysis Division, "Report No. 3, Bombing Accuracy of the USAAF Heavy & Medium Bombers," USSBS, 4.

38. Bauer, *Tgvot*, 145.

39. Kitchens, "Bombing of Auschwitz," 246. Kitchens' analysis is based on the expert opinion of Dino A. Brugioni, a CIA photo analyst and a USAAF veteran. For Brugioni's full report, see Dino A. Brugioni, "The Aerial Photos of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Complex," in Berenbaum and Neufeld, *Bombing of Auschwitz*, 52–57. It is important to note that Brugioni himself, many years after the fact, argued that it would have been possible to recognize the gas chambers at the time, had the interpreters been supplied with the Vrba-Wetzler report. However, that has to be viewed as wisdom in retrospect. There is a difference between recognizing the gas chambers *post facto*, after their existence became universally known using data provided by modern equipment, and recognizing them *during* the war, without prior knowledge, simultaneously with other pressing duties.

40. For a full English-language version of the Vrba-Wetzler report, also known as the “Auschwitz Protocol,” see Document no. 1, “The Extermination Camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau in Upper Silesia,” in Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, 12:5–43, as well as an online version: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/auschproto.html> (accessed February 5, 2013).
41. Kitchens, “Bombing of Auschwitz,” 249.
42. Document no. 2, “Report of a Polish Major,” in Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, 12:46–64. Erdheim claims that analysis of the photographs alone could have supplied the required intelligence for the mission. However, he grossly exaggerates the value of visual intelligence, and underestimates the ignorance of interpreters concerning the extermination facilities.
43. Herf, “Extermination Camps,” 916.
44. The first part of the original Russian document has been scanned and published on the internet: [http://farm1.static.flickr.com/51/127080246\\_25ca6a2ea4\\_o.gif](http://farm1.static.flickr.com/51/127080246_25ca6a2ea4_o.gif) (accessed February 5, 2013). For a full English-language translation of the Pytko-Pugev report see [http://holocaustcontroversies.blogspot.com/2006/04/what-soviets-knew-about-auschwitz-and\\_12.html](http://holocaustcontroversies.blogspot.com/2006/04/what-soviets-knew-about-auschwitz-and_12.html) (accessed February 5, 2013). The report can be found in the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG 06.025\*47. For an analysis of the reports see the article by Pavel Polian, “Tri Metamorfozy 1944,” <http://www.polit.ru/analytics/2008/01/28/holokost.html> (accessed February 5, 2013).
45. See F.D. Sverdlov, ed., *Dokumenty obviniaut: Kholokost. Svidetel'stva Krasnoi Armii* (Moscow: Nauchno-presvetitel'nyi tsentr “Kholokost,” 1996), 109–10.
46. Vasilii Petrenko, *Do i posle Osventsima* (Moscow: Fond “Kholokost,” 2000), 99–100. The available intelligence on Auschwitz, as well as Petrenko’s testimony, is analyzed by Polian, “Tri Metamorfozy.” On the tactical intelligence see Ivan Konev, *Year of Victory* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 9, 11.
47. Kruglov to Vyshinskii, October 9, 1944, GARF, fond 7021, opis 108, del. 37; see also Polian, “Tri Metamorfozy,” 2.
48. Petrenko, *Do i posle*, 88, 92–3; Marshal Konev (*Year of Victory*, 35) corroborates Petrenko’s testimony. However, he does not blame Stalin for withholding information. He writes that though he was shocked by what he had heard, he could not spare the time to visit the liberated camp: “It was not that I did not want to see that death camp with my own eyes; I simply made up my mind not to see it. The combat operations were in full swing, and to command them was such a strain that I could find neither time nor justification for abandoning myself to my own emotions. During the war I did not belong to myself.” Furthermore, according to the newly published testimony of Jacob Vinichenko, a soldier who served in General Petrenko’s division, the soldiers were completely surprised when they stumbled upon the camp after heavy fighting in the area. See Jacob Vinichenko, “Hazarti Le’Oshwitz,” *Haaretz*, November 9, 2009.
49. Konev, *Year of Victory*, 5.
50. Polian, “Tri Metamorfozy,” 2–3.
51. Petrenko, *Do i posle*, 89–90.

52. Document 2.10, "Leon Kubowitzki, Head, Rescue Department, World Jewish Congress, to J.W. Pehle, War Refugee Board, July 1, 1944," in Berenbaum and Neufeld, *Bombing of Auschwitz*, 259.
53. Quoted in Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, 256–57.
54. Rafael Medoff, "The Roosevelt Administration, David Ben-Gurion, and the Failure to Bomb Auschwitz: A Mystery Solved," <http://wymaninstitute.org/Report-Bombing-Auschwitz.pdf> (accessed February 5, 2013), 13,19.
55. Asher, "The Soviet Union," 895.
56. Epstein to Ben-Gurion, September 3, 1944, Central Zionist Archives (CZA), S25/286.
57. Porat, *Hanhaga*, 401.
58. Misha Shauli to Dina Porat, September 28, 2009, communicated to authors courtesy of Misha Shauli.
59. For example, when the academician I.S. Narsky tried to refute accusations that he concealed his "Jewish-Polish nationality," he did everything possible to prove that his "nationality" was Russian. See "A letter to President of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, M.V. Keldysh, October 10, 1970," in Theodore Freedman, ed., *Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union: Its Roots and Consequences* (New York: Freedom Library Press of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1984), 591–92. For another example of the use of this term, see Gennadi Kostyrchenko, *Out of the Red Shadows: Antisemitism in Stalin's Russia* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1995), 38.
60. Epstein to Ben-Gurion, September 3, 1944, CZA, S25/286.
61. Petrenko, *Do i posle*, 101–102. It is worth noting that from 1980 onward, General Petrenko himself became known for his activism in Holocaust commemoration, his rebuttal of Holocaust denials, and his struggle against antisemitism in Russia and elsewhere. His honesty and self-criticism on the moral failure of the Soviet Union during the Holocaust are laudable.
62. Pavel Polian, "The Internment of Returning Soviet Prisoners of War after 1945," in *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II*, ed. Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad (New York: Berg, 2005), 123–41.
63. Edvard Radzinsky, *Stalin: The First In-Depth Biography Based on Explosive New Documents from Russia's Secret Archives* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 25.
64. Asher, "The Soviet Union," 889–90, 896–97.
65. J.V. Stalin, "Reply to an Inquiry of the Jewish News Agency in the United States, January 12, 1941," first published in *Pravda* November 30, 1936. Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1931/01/12.htm> (accessed January 6, 2013). For an analysis of the official party line towards the Jews in the pre-Stalinist period, see Mario Kessler, *Heroische Illusion und Stalin-Terror: Beiträge zum Kommunismus-Forschung* (Hamburg: VSA, 1999), 210–17, 221–35.
66. *Pravda*, January 28, 1941, in Freedman, *Anti-Semitism*, 518–21. For an analysis of Soviet anti-semitism, see Benjamin Pinkus, *Yehudei Rusia ve-haBrit Hamoatsot: Toldot Mi'ut Le'umi* (Be'er-Sheva, Israel: Kiryat Sedeh Bo'ker and Universitat Ben-Guryon ba-Negev, 1986), 261–79.

67. Georgi Dimitrov, *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933–1949*, ed. Ivo Banac (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 163.
68. Kostyrchenko, *Red Shadows*, 24, 28.
69. *Ibid.*; Pinkus, *Yehudei*, 252. During the Yalta Conference Stalin was reported to have complained to Roosevelt and Churchill, saying, in effect, that “the Jewish problem was extremely difficult. The Soviet Union had tried to establish a national home for the Jews, but they had stayed only two or three years before returning to the cities. The Jews were natural traders . . . but much had been accomplished by putting small groups of them in agricultural areas.” The remark was documented by Edward R. Stettinius Jr. in his memoirs; see *Roosevelt and the Russians: The Yalta Conference* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1949), 278.
70. Kostyrchenko, *Red Shadows*, 13.
71. Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 431.
72. Kostyrchenko, *Red Shadows*, 49.
73. Grishaiev to Yashechkin, February 1, 1945, reproduced in Sverdlov, ed., *Dokumenty obviniaut*, 115–16. For an online version of this and many other related documents: <http://rudocs.exdat.com/docs/index-79361.html?page=3>, as well as <http://www.holocf.ru/pages/77> (both accessed February 5, 2013).
74. “O chudovishnykh prestupleniiaakh germanskogo pravitel’sstva v Osven’tsime,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, May 8, 1945, quoted in Polian, “Tri Metamorfozy.”
75. *Ibid.*
76. In response to a report by the Polish government-in-exile on the extermination of the Jews, the U.S. and British governments on December 17, 1942 issued a joint declaration in which they stated: “The attention of the Belgian, Czechoslovak, Greek, Yugoslav, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norwegian, Polish, Soviet, United Kingdom and United States Governments . . . and the French National Committee condemn in the strongest possible terms this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination. They declare that such events can only strengthen the resolve of all freedom-loving peoples to overthrow the barbarous Hitlerite tyranny. They reaffirm their solemn resolution to insure that those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution, and to press on with the necessary practical measures to this end.” Here we see that Stalin did not actively oppose his allies’ condemnation of German anti-Jewish crimes. On the other hand, it is striking that the declaration focuses on overthrowing Hitler and punishing perpetrators of crimes against Jews; nowhere in the text do the signatories undertake to assist the Jews actively (“press on with the necessary measures” appears to refer to the goal of exacting retribution, and in any case hardly seems to constitute an immediate commitment to forceful intervention to save Jewish lives). One may wonder whether the Soviets, and perhaps Stalin himself, insisted on the use of such convoluted language—language that carefully avoids taking the logical next step. See *The United Nations Review* 3, no. 1 (1943): 1, quoted in Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress (Foundations of the Laws of War)* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 89.